

Miami Men's Basketball Clips

2020-21

Six Weeks of Work

By Alex Schwartz
MiamiHurricanes.com
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CORAL GABLES, Fla. – It is 15 days later than expected, but the first official practice date of the 2020-21 college basketball season has arrived.

Tomorrow, Oct. 14, programs across the nation will move from skill workouts and lighter training into full-fledged practices. The date comes 42 days before the first game of the season, which the NCAA moved back from Nov. 10 to Nov. 25 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the University of Miami men's basketball team, like its competitors all over the country, tomorrow presents a small step towards normalcy and the start of a new season.

"[We are] just looking forward and anxious to get back on the court together," redshirt senior guard Kameron McGusty said. "...There was a lot of doubt with the season [due to] this whole coronavirus, from the time it started until now. So, I'm glad that they got a date for us to get started and we're all just excited."

Despite the difficulties created by the pandemic, Miami head coach Jim Larrañaga is encouraged by where his team is at right now.

Entering his 10th season at the helm of the Hurricanes, Larrañaga looks forward to seeing the players compete against one another to get an even better assessment of their status as a whole.

"I would love to have a few [additional] scrimmages right now to see where we are because I think we're much further ahead than we have been the last two seasons," he said. "I think we're at a good place. We're healthy; we've got 11 scholarship players available. We've got size, we've got guard play, we've got athletic ability. I think our team should be very well-prepared to compete with the best teams in our league."

Including walk-ons and transfers, the Miami coaches actually have over a dozen players at their disposal entering official practices.

For a team that has battled significant injuries for the last three seasons, it is particularly beneficial to have a complete roster available. In fact, just last Wednesday, the Hurricanes played a 40-minute game amongst themselves for the first time in multiple years.

"I remember last summer when we were doing workouts, we didn't even have 10. So, we

couldn't even do five-on-five. We were doing four-on-four, three-on-three, stuff like that," McGusty said. "So, it's definitely good and it's going to help us because now we can get a real look. We can get real reps of five-on-five now and build our team up and build our great habits through these scrimmages, now that we have 10 guys."

In addition to physical health, Larrañaga also likes where his team is at from a mental standpoint as the clock ticks closer and closer to the start of the season.

"I think you can easily evaluate where you are mentally and emotionally by the level of energy that the players bring to a practice session," Larrañaga said. "And right now, the guys have worked very, very hard. They're very enthusiastic. I think they have a lot of confidence in each other."

To McGusty, these next six weeks will actually be more about the team's cohesion than they will be about anything else. The 6-foot-5 guard is excited to see the Hurricanes put talent and chemistry together.

A big boost to Miami's team-building goals over the next month-and-a-half comes from the significant veteran presence on the roster. There are seven seniors in the group, including five scholarship players who will be on the court this year.

"We've got guys that have been in college and playing college basketball for four or five years," McGusty explained. "That always helps, not only in-game, but also for times like now when we're trying to build our culture, put our team together. We just need that leadership and that comes from older guys that have experienced it and been there."

As important as veteran leadership is, Larrañaga notes that "youthful enthusiasm needs to be there" from Miami's underclassmen, as well.

Along with its three-man sophomore class, the roster features two highly-recruited freshmen in forward Matt Cross and guard Earl Timberlake.

Both of them have impressed those around them during offseason workouts, but their coach knows they still have work to do over the next few weeks—and even after that—to be fully ready.

"I think both Matt and Earl are very well-prepared to contribute at the offensive end," Larrañaga said. "Earl has a lot of different skills that he brings to the table. Matt Cross is one

of our best 3-point shooters. The challenge for all freshmen is really at the defensive end of the floor. The game is faster, it's more physical."

Larrañaga and his staff will have three primary focal points in the lead-up to the season, not just for the rookies, but for the entire team.

The first is strength and conditioning. The second is skill development. The third is game preparation.

It is that initial category where many student-athletes, in all sports at all schools, fell behind due to issues presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Hurricanes, however, having been working hard to be in top physical condition over the past several months—and they have had some extra spark when doing so.

"As a team, I think we're in some of the best shape we could be in. Ever since we were allowed back on campus, we've been in a constant mode of just grinding and really trying to get back on track. The last two years haven't been some of the best years; we haven't made the Tournament," McGusty shared. "...I think we take that on and we accept it. When we're working out together or whenever we're doing these practices and going through these drills, I feel like that's in the back of our head. These last two years that we've had where we just haven't had seasons that we're expecting to be having. So, I think that motivates us."

McGusty added that every senior on the team is focused on making the 2021 NCAA Tournament and not ending their college careers with a losing season.

The Katy, Texas, native is confident this group has the abilities to excel and now needs to take all the necessary steps to make that happen.

"I think we have a very talented team this year," he said. "It's just going to be how we are going to put it together."

Starting tomorrow, the Hurricanes have six weeks of practice to work on doing just that.

Top storylines for the 2020-21 University of Miami men's and women's basketball teams

Michelle Kaufman
Miami Herald
Oct. 31, 2020

The college basketball season tips off in less than a month, on Nov. 25, and the University of Miami men's and women's teams still do not know their schedules.

The men's team only knows that it will play host to Purdue on Dec. 8 in the ACC-Big Ten Challenge and that a non-conference game against FAU is said to be in the works. The women's team is planning non-conference matchups against regional opponents within driving distance.

Like everything else, the ACC has been disrupted by COVID-19 and working out a schedule of indoor sporting events during a pandemic has proven to be a major challenge. Basketball teams play as many as three games a week, teams and officials are required to travel far more frequently than in football, so the conference is still working on protocols and testing plans.

A schedule is expected to be released soon. In the meantime, UM men's coach Jim Larranaga and women's coach Katie Meier are preparing their teams the best they can.

Larranaga enters his 10th season with the Hurricanes and Meier her 16th. Both teams finished middle of the pack in the conference last year. The men were 15-16 overall and 7-13 in the ACC. The women were 15-15 and 7-11.

Both coaches are doing all they can to ensure their players stay safe during the pandemic.

"I'm very, very proud of our guys for handling it so far, but we've almost been in our own bubble," Larranaga said. "Our practice facility has been limited to our players, coaches and a couple of managers. That's it. They've all been tested. It was once a week, now twice a week. As long as we're smart about who we interact with, I think we can stay safe, but when you're dealing with young adults who already have been quarantined since last March, you got guys with COVID fatigue. Will they interact with other people?"

"I've lost a friend to COVID, a former player to COVID and I have a relative with COVID. It's a very dangerous virus. You can't let up your guard. We want to keep ourselves safe so we can have a basketball season. It's great our football team hasn't missed a game, but others in the ACC have."

Senior Taylor Mason said the UM women's team has become more dedicated to the sport during the pandemic.

"It has changed our mentality, mindset and drive, so COVID has had some benefits," Mason said. "It has made us love the game more, made us appreciate the small things, so we are going much harder than before."

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Here are some storylines heading into the 2020-21 season...

SAM WAARDENBURG OUT FOR THE YEAR

Senior power forward Sam Waardenburg is out for the season with a left foot injury. The New Zealand native started 24 of 30 games last season

"It was a big blow to lose Sam," said Larranaga. "He was our most experienced front court player, our leading rebounder from last year, practicing extremely well and we're going to dramatically miss his defense, rebounding, experience and his overall demeanor on the court."

Sophomore Anthony Walker, freshman Matt Cross, and red-shirt junior Deng Gak will have to step up.

NYSIER BROOKS IS THE NEW "GLUE GUY"

Keep an eye out for 7-foot redshirt senior center Nysier Brooks, a grad transfer from the University of Cincinnati, where he ranked among the conference leaders in blocks and rebounds. Brooks, one of 11 siblings, said his large family taught him to speak up and deal with different personalities, so he has become an instant leader for UM.

"He's very vocal," Larranaga said. "That's going to really help us defensively. Nysier will be a really good defender and rebounder for us, will block some shots."

Brooks called himself "the glue guy who can chain everyone together" and teammate Kam McGusty agreed. "Every good team has a guy like Nysier, a player who brings energy," McGusty said. "Nysier is our energizer."

FRESHMEN TO PLAY BIG ROLES

Larranaga said freshman guard Earl Timberlake and freshman forward Matt Cross are expected to play significant roles. He compared Timberlake to former UM player Bruce Brown, now with the Detroit Pistons

"Earl is more physically ready than most freshmen," Larranaga said. "He's 6-5, strong, athletic, can handle. He's a tough hard-nosed guy going to basket. Whether he starts or come off the bench, he's going to be a major contributor from Day One."

GUARDS IMPROVED FROM LAST SEASON

Sophomore guard Isaiah Wong gained 20 pounds of muscle in the off-season and comes in at 182 lbs, "considerably bigger and stronger" than last year, Larranaga said. He has also worked on his three-point shooting.

McGusty has given up soda, gotten in the best shape of his life, and his fitness is showing on the court.

The coach said starting point guard Chris Lykes recovered from knee surgery and is "playing the best basketball in practice. Will it convert to games? I really hope so because he's had a great summer and fall."

MEIER AIMS FOR POSTSEASON BREAKTHROUGH

The UM women reached the post-season 10 years in a row from 2009-19, and Meier's team has had a 100 percent

graduation rate. She'd like a deeper run in March.

"I'm satisfied with my body of work, but we want to break through the second, third weekend in March, that's something we're trying to do," Meier said. "Overall, the 100 percent graduation rate and 10 straight post-seasons is pretty impressive. More so the graduation rate. Everyone who's ever played for me that spent four years has graduated. I have never had an ineligible player, so the culture's good."

INTERNATIONAL FLAVOR HELPS HURRICANES

The Canes roster reads like the United Nations with five internationals -- two from France and others from Sweden, Spain and Croatia. Meier said they blend perfectly with her domestic players.

"There are some programs that commit to recruiting internationally and they get all the scouting services and do it that way, but we really have a relationship connection," she said, adding that the players she got from Sweden and France knew of former UM players from those countries who had good experiences at the school.

"A lot of times we have a very athletic style and we've been able to use the international players in positions of the vision, passing and time per touch and they keep us playing fast," Meier said. "That's really helped, and I've really fallen in love with the combination of that mix of talent."

NO EXCUSES WITH SENIORS

With four seniors on the team -- Endia Banks, Mykea Gray, Taylor Mayson, Kelsey Marshall -- Meier said it is time to make a postseason run.

"This has to be a year when close games have to break our way," Meier said. "We have no excuse for that. We have to rely on our upperclassmen who have been there before."

The Hurricanes Endured an Up-and-Down Season Last Winter and Are Ready to Hit the Hardwood Running

Wyatt Kopleman
State of the U
Nov. 2, 2020

Despite no official schedule having been released for the 2020-2021 Miami Hurricanes' season, the program looks to rebound strongly after finishing tied for 10th place in the ACC standings last March.

Similar to the prior season, Canes fans watched the team lose games with an onset of injuries to key players including guard Kameron McGusty (a 2021 NBA Draft prospect) as well as forwards Keith Stone and Sam Waardenburg, who will now miss this season having suffered a foot injury. Guard Chris Lykes also encountered a groin injury mid-season and a face injury prior to the ACC Tournament.

Finishing 7-13 in the conference is nothing for a program like Miami's to hang their hat on, having been avalanched by blue blood teams like Duke with two, 30-point defeats in both meetings.

That is not to say all 13 losses were wash-outs, however. A handful were pure nail biters, serving as reminders for how detrimental mental lapses can be in late-game situations. Many recall the 79-83 overtime loss to ninth-ranked Florida State suffered at home on Jan. 18, a contest that initially saw the Hurricanes ahead by 13 points with nine minutes remaining in the second half.

And then there were the games where coach Jim Larrañaga's unit resembled the mighty Miami Hurricanes of old, having won an ACC Championship in 2013 and advancing to two Sweet 16 games. Blowout wins against opponents including Wake Forest and Boston College in mid-February were certainly a reviver, but a 102-95 triple-overtime win against Virginia Tech at Cassell Coliseum breathed even more life into the locker room.

More importantly, the latter reminded the Canes how vital mental toughness and trust remain against some of America's top teams, with countless overtime games that end with a margin of five points or fewer. Larrañaga stated after the fatiguing battle that they "expect every ACC game to be a struggle and then you just have to find a way."

The rest of the season brought a mixed bag. The following game would result in a 16-point loss at the hands of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind., as Miami allowed Fighting Irish forward John Mooney a double-double and guard T.J. Gibbs to can five of six 3-point shots. Two games later would bring another

heartbreaking loss, losing 44-46 to the No. 22 Virginia Cavaliers at home. The Canes would prevail against the Syracuse Orange three days later with a four-point overtime win at the Watsco Center to close out the regular season.

The program would soldier on into the ACC Tournament as the No. 9 seed and would face a No. 8 Clemson team led by forward Aamir Simms and guard Tevin Mack. The Tigers were more than hungry for revenge having lost to the Canes by five in overtime at Littlejohn Coliseum on New Year's Eve.

21 points from Lykes, who averaged over 15 points per game, and 17 points from guard DJ Vasiljevic would not suffice with the second-round contest ending in favor of Clemson by five. The winner would face top-seeded Florida State in the quarterfinals, only for it to be canceled due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

With another rollercoaster season in the books, the Canes knew they could have had another crack at beating the Seminoles with the leadership they had from Vasiljevic and Stone, besides Larrañaga's empowering voice.

"When we recruit, we really recruit role models, kids that not only we would want to coach, but that our university would be very proud of and community would be very proud of them, both on the court and off the court," Larrañaga said of Vasiljevic and Stone. "They've got great attitudes. They've got a great work ethic. They behave in a first-class manner."

Attitude, class, and commitment to the program has remained something Larrañaga has preached since his arrival to Coral Gables in 2011. Miami has surely seen better days from a success standpoint though what has not wavered is the talent that has gravitated to UM, given the commitments of four-star recruits in guards Earl Timberlake and Matt Cross.

So, now what? With just shy of a month until the school and its fans really see what the team with added depth and star power is made of, coach Larrañaga and his coaching staff have been preparing under radically different conditions than normal. COVID-19 has overshadowed how college basketball will be scheduled and operated this winter, and the health and safety of all will be of utmost importance.

The team's two newcomers will nonetheless be heavily relied upon for offensive produc-

tion, in addition to rebounding. Guards Harlond Beverly and Isaiah Wong will be critical to the success of the program, after impressive freshman campaigns. Forward Anthony Walker and transfer center Nysier Brooks will have to step up to fill the absence of Waardenburg, as the team already lacked consistent rebounding and shot blocking.

With already a storied coaching career in his back pocket, Larrañaga looks to celebrate his 10th season at UM with an improved ACC record in addition to a potentially deep March Madness run.

Lessons Learned

By Alex Schwartz
MiamiHurricanes.com
Nov. 2, 2020

CORAL GABLES, Fla. – To say Isaiah Wong's freshman campaign started off cold would be generous.

To say it ended hot would simply not be doing him justice.

Through the first 18 contests of the year, Wong averaged 3.1 points, 1.7 rebounds and 0.6 assists per game, while shooting 29.7 percent (19-of-64) from the floor, 30.8 percent (4-of-13) from 3-point range and 60.9 percent (14-of-23) at the line.

He ranked eighth on the team in scoring during that span and only three times did he surpass five points, notching a high of eight.

"It was real frustrating. Just seeing all these kids coming in—they were doing their thing and I was just struggling, missing shots that I normally make," Wong recalled. "So, I felt like just coming into the game, I was like, 'What's happening?' My mental game, it was not there at the time. During warmups, I was missing layups. I was air-balling shots during warmups. It was just not happening for me. During practice too, I was just really overthinking stuff."

Over the final 13 outings, Wong averaged 14.2 points, 4.7 rebounds and 1.6 assists per game, while shooting 47.6 percent (60-of-126) from the field, 39.5 percent (15-of-38) beyond the arc and 92.5 percent (49-of-53) at the stripe.

He placed second among Hurricanes in scoring in that stretch, tallied double-digit points 10 times and thrice eclipsed 20.

"I felt like I always had this in me," Wong shared. "It was just recognizing it and getting my confidence up."

Wong went from an afterthought on opponents' scouting report to the very forefront of it. He claimed back-to-back ACC Freshman of the Week accolades, becoming the second Hurricane to do so along with Lonnie Walker IV, a one-and-done, top-20 NBA draftee.

Although his stats really started to shift in the 19th game, Wong actually felt like it was in the prior outing, at famed Cameron Indoor Stadium in Durham, N.C., when he began to get in the groove.

"I felt like the Duke game when I had [eight] points, I felt like I was coming back. It was Duke and I ... wasn't really scoring, but I felt like when I was missing, I was feeling my touch coming

back," Wong shared. "So I was like, 'These are good misses. I'm making some of them.' I was getting my touch coming back."

Starting guards Chris Lykes and Kameron McGusty missed the next game, a road matchup at North Carolina, due to injury. That gave Wong a chance to earn his first start as a collegian.

After posting 19 points on 6-of-11 shooting against the Tar Heels, Wong never lost his spot. He opened every game the rest of the season.

"The opportunity that Isaiah had to move into the starting lineup changed everything about his freshman year," Miami head coach Jim Larranaga said. "...When you're a sub, the one thing you know is when you go in there, you're going to come out so that the coach can get the starter back in. But once you move into the starting lineup and you know you're going to play 30 minutes or more, it helps you to relax and play with a lot more confidence."

Wong credits assistant coach Adam Fisher for providing suggestions during the season to help him understand concepts at both ends of the floor better.

It all paid off during those final 13 games when Wong showed everything he could do, putting on full display the talents that made him a consensus top-80 recruit.

"He always had that potential; he just had to gain some experience," Larranaga said. "The mental part of the game, learning a new offense, learning your responsibilities defensively, those were the more difficult things for Isaiah, [as was] getting accustomed to being the youngest guy on the team rather than the oldest. Just a lot of adjustments that just took time [for him] to overcome."

Now that he has all of that behind him, Wong is looking to carry the late-season success from 2019-20 into his second campaign.

The 6-foot-3 guard feels capable of doing just that.

"I feel a lot more confident going from freshman to sophomore year because I feel more adjusted," Wong shared. "I know a lot more than I knew my freshman year. I'm a lot more comfortable running the plays ... and [I am] used to college right now."

Wong also recognizes that in addition to his increased understanding on the hardwood, he needs to put in extra effort off it. He has thus made it a priority to get up additional shots and spend more time in the weight room.

In addition, Wong will need to adjust once again when the season begins, albeit this time in a different way.

"Last year he primarily played the two-guard spot. This year we're expecting him to play the one and two," Larranaga said. We're expecting him to have a little more versatility and play multiple positions, including the point guard position."

Wong also has another role that he plans to take on during his sophomore campaign and that is one of a leader.

Having gone through his own difficulties as a freshman, he wants to be there for this year's crop of newcomers—forward Matt Cross and guard Earl Timberlake—when they do so, as well as be there for the team as a whole.

"Just being more vocal, [as well as] just trying to calm down sometimes when people are in a rush when we're struggling," Wong said of his goals for this season. "When we're down, just try to figure out what's happening and try to get better as a team. We got freshmen on the team—we got Earl and Matt—and I know they're going to have times when they struggle and I'm going to try to help them throughout the season."

Along with Cross, Timberlake and Nysier Brooks, a redshirt senior center who sat out last year as a transfer, the Hurricanes return eight of 10 scholarship letter winners from the 2019-20 season. That list includes four of five starters.

Miami is looking to get back to the NCAA Tournament for the fourth time in six years and Wong thinks the team has a chance "to be very good."

The Piscataway, N.J., native feels the Hurricanes will be consistently capable of producing points and knows defensive toughness will be of significant importance.

Now, after months of on-court troubles transformed into dazzling performances, Wong is set to play a vital role in both areas.

"He's gone through the struggles that freshmen go through, but I think he's practicing very hard and very well, and will be very ready to have a successful sophomore campaign," Larranaga said. "...He's going to be a huge factor because he not only can score the ball on offense, he's also learned to be a very good defender."

2020-2021 Preview: Miami Hurricanes Men's Basketball

Wyatt Kopleman
State of the U
Nov. 9, 2020

The Miami Hurricanes men's basketball program has been working tirelessly to prepare for what could be a very different college basketball season ahead, as the NCAA continues to endure the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I'm very proud of our guys for the way they've handled it so far," Miami head coach Jim Larrañaga said. The skipper originally from the Bronx, N.Y., has reaffirmed that the team maintains operations in the safest way possible at the Watsco Center's practice facility.

"We've almost been in our own bubble. Our practice facility's been limited to our players, our coaches, and a couple of managers, and that's it. It's a very dangerous virus [and] our players have been very, very smart in dealing with it so far," said Larrañaga, who will be coaching his 10th season in Coral Gables, Fla., this winter.

Larrañaga added that the frequency of team testing has increased as an extra precaution with the season approaching.

"At one time it was once a week and now it's twice a week. So, as long as we're smart about who we interact with when we're not at practice, I think we can stay safe," Larrañaga said. The 71-year-old coach has also lost a former player and friend because of the coronavirus.

But despite the prevention of the coronavirus' impacts, the Hurricanes look to rebound after a rollercoaster season that ended with a second-round loss to the Clemson Tigers in the ACC Tournament.

"I would say as long as we stay healthy, we should be in much better shape than we have been in the last two seasons," Larrañaga said.

With added talent and depth in guard Earl Timberlake, forward Matt Cross, and Cincinnati transfer center Nysier Brooks, Miami will also return seven players from last year's roster. The lone exception is redshirt senior forward Sam Waardenburg who will be sidelined with a foot injury for approximately six months, missing the entire season.

"It's a big blow to us to lose Sam," Larrañaga said. "He was our most experienced frontcourt player [and] our leading rebounder from last season. He was practicing extremely well, and we're going to dramatically miss his defense, his rebounding, his experience, and just his overall demeanor on the court."

Larrañaga stated that sophomore forward Anthony Walker, Cross, and redshirt junior forward Deng Gak would have had to compete with the now-injured New Zealand native for the starting power forward slot. That now remains open given Waardenburg's absence, though Larrañaga remains optimistic with the available talent.

"I'm pleased with the way Anthony was practicing, the way Matt has practiced and what he brings to the table," Larrañaga said. "It's very nice having Deng Gak back, because Deng can play both the four and the five."

Gak, who could have helped bolster Miami's frontcourt last year, has also been sidelined the past two seasons with both left and right knee injuries. It was initially believed that the Sydney, Australia, native would receive a medical waiver since he had only played in less than 30 percent of games per year.

Redshirt senior center Rodney Miller has been improving offensively through the offseason, as his veteran leadership will remain vital this year.

"I've really worked on mastering my left and right-hand jump hook," Miller said. "I can do both really smoothly either hand, so I think you're gonna see a lot more of that. I've been working on my free throws [and] my mid-range game just to expand a little bit and give them [opponents] some space."

After being the team's lone center last year, Miller believes that the Canes having extra players at hand will help them more in the long run.

"I feel like that's been a question that we've had for the past couple years I've been here because we've plagued with injuries and eligibility issues," Miller said. "We have a stockpile of guys and it's gonna be huge for us. We've realized that depth is what helps teams make it far because it just lowers injuries if you can rotate capable guys who are ready to play, and that's what we have."

The addition of Brooks will aid Miami's big men in Miller and Gak with defending and rebounding, as the Canes were second-to-last in scoring defense allowing 73.2 points per game.

"I know we'll be real good at being able to adjust to different kinds of teams that different play styles," Brooks said. "We'll be good to adjust in any type of game situation with the players that we have with the young freshmen coming in and some of the older players that still will be here."

Miami saw senior guards Chris Lykes and Kameron McGusty sidelined with injuries at various points in the season. But now the two are prepared to help lead the program against the ACC's toughest competition.

"I think we've got a lot of talented guys that can play a number of different positions," Lykes said. "We've been working on a couple of different things, so the offense might be a little different, but it's really just going to take some time just for us to get together."

McGusty, a former Oklahoma transfer, has worked on his body this offseason from a nutritional and conditioning standpoint as this will likely aid in more efficient performance on both ends of the court.

"I really took my body serious, changed my diet a little bit, [and] started taking my off-court conditioning a little more importantly," McGusty said. "If I want to play good on both sides of the ball you gotta be in the right shape. Those are some of the things I wanted to do last year but I just realized I wasn't in enough shape. That's honestly the truthful answer, so that's one of the things I worked on this offseason and I'm looking forward to put it altogether and get on the court and show it."

Lykes averaged over 15 points per game last season, shouldering the scoring load for the second consecutive season. McGusty, on the other hand, initially joined his backcourt teammate in doing the same until sophomore guard Isaiah Wong broke out and impressed the coaching staff in the second half of the season.

For Wong, it was a literal tale of two halves while only averaging 3.1 points, 1.7 rebounds, and 0.6 assists in the first 18 games last season. The final 13 matchups, however, saw the Piscataway, N.J., native increase those numbers to 14.2 points, 4.7 rebounds, and 1.6 assists per game, while shooting 47.6 percent.

"I felt like I always had this in me," Wong said. "It was just recognizing it and getting my confidence up."

Whether Larrañaga starts or brings Wong off the bench, performances similar to his first college start in Chapel Hill, N.C., will be critical for the Canes.

"He always had that potential; he just had to gain some experience," Larrañaga said. "The mental part of the game, learning a new offense, learning your responsibilities defensively, those were the more difficult things for Isaiah. Just a lot of adjustments that just took time [for him] to overcome."

Wong, who has gained about 20 pounds of muscle, worked hard in the weight room during the offseason with the team's strength and conditioning coach Phil Baier. That investment has paid dividends on the hardwood, and Larrañaga had not failed to take notice.

"He is considerably bigger and stronger," Larrañaga said. "He's practicing very well; he's played both the one and two

and he's playing both positions with a great deal of confidence. He's shooting the three with a lot of confidence and I would say he's significantly improved from last year in that category."

The program's freshmen in Cross and Timberlake will provide an additional amount of fresh energy in terms of scoring and rebounding. Both will be able to fit in to the team's rotation, regardless of whether Larrañaga's game plan has the Canes with a smaller or larger five on the court.

"Earl has practiced very hard and very well," Larrañaga said. "He's a tremendous competitor. He brings an entirely different set of athletic skills and basketball skills. He's more physically ready than most freshman in a sense that he's 6-foot-5, he's strong, athletic, and he can handle [the ball]. Whether Earl starts or comes in off the bench, he's going to be a major contributor from day one."

Even Larrañaga cited how Timberlake's rebounding abilities will benefit the team, a major team weakness to better from last year.

"He's been rebounding the ball very well at both ends," Larrañaga said. "Losing our best rebounder in Sam Waardenburg, all of the sudden the coaching staff is very, very focused on 'Who can play that position and give us the best chance of defending and rebounding at that position?' We keep stats in practice, and he's one of our leading rebounders in practice. He's also someone defensively that would allow us to switch one through four, and we're hoping that would help us improve our defense versus ball screens."

In terms of defense, Lykes said that "it will be a different team defensively and better, too." He and McGusty strove to set the tone on that end of the floor by improving their defensive game.

"I think we have solid rim protection in both Rod, Deng and Nysier Brooks, who was Defensive Player of the Year at Cincinnati," Lykes said. "I think we also got guys that guard a number of different positions. One of the focal points that we've picking up on in practice is picking up full court. I think we have the agility and speed to do that."

Among the ACC, the Canes finished last in defensive rebounding, averaging only 38.5 rebounds per game due to the lack of size and strength in the paint. This will remain a critical category to improve upon besides obtaining more balanced scoring.

After also ranking ninth last year in the conference with a scoring average of 71.2 points per game, Miami hopes that their newcomers can effectively contribute and take pressure off of Lykes and McGusty. The team's offense remained stagnant at times, leading to more opportunities for blue-blood programs including Duke and Louisville to force contested shots.

With two consecutive seasons of NCAA Tournament absences, the Miami Hurricanes will begin the season with a sense of redemption to contend for a potentially higher ACC ranking and a deeper run in the ACC Tournament, let alone March Madness itself. The only game that currently lies on their schedule remains the ACC/Big Ten Challenge at home against Purdue on Dec. 8. An official schedule is likely to be released within the coming weeks.

Lykes Named Preseason First Team All-ACC

MiamiHurricanes.com
Nov. 11, 2020

CORAL GABLES, Fla. – Chris Lykes of the University of Miami men's basketball team earned Preseason First Team All-ACC distinction, as announced Wednesday morning by the league office.

A 5-foot-7, 160-pound senior guard, Lykes tallied 50 points in the balloting, tied for the fifth-most of any player in the conference.

The Mitchellville, Md., native is the first two-time Preseason All-ACC honoree in program history; he earned second-team status last year. The other Hurricanes to garner at least one such accolade are Jack McClinton (2008-09), Malcolm Grant (2011-12) and Bruce Brown Jr. (2017-18), the former two of whom also picked up first-team plaudits.

Lykes was also one of eight players to receive a nod for Preseason ACC Player of the Year, tying for sixth among that group with three votes.

The third-leading returning scorer in the league, behind only North Carolina's Garrison Brooks, the Preseason ACC Player of the Year, and Georgia Tech's Michael Devoe, Lykes averaged 15.4 points per game last year.

Along with the all-conference teams, the ACC also announced Wednesday the preseason predicted order of finish. The Hurricanes placed seventh in the voting with 1,223 points, just 11 behind sixth-place Syracuse.

This is the highest Miami has ranked in the preseason balloting since a fourth-place mark in 2017-18. It is also fifth-highest selection in head coach Jim Larrañaga's 10-year tenure in Coral Gables.

Lykes and the Hurricanes are set to open the 2020-21 campaign at home Nov. 25 against Stetson.

To keep up with the University of Miami men's basketball team on social media, follow @CanesHoops on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

The 2020-21 Miami Hurricanes men's basketball season is presented by First National Bank.

ACC Preseason Order of Finish (first-place votes in parentheses)

1. Virginia (97), 2214
2. Duke (34), 2146
3. Florida State (15), 1973

4. North Carolina (7), 1933
5. Louisville (2), 1693
6. Syracuse, 1234
7. Miami, 1223
8. NC State, 1149
9. Georgia Tech, 1147
10. Clemson, 1057
11. Virginia Tech, 794
12. Notre Dame, 769
13. Pittsburgh, 635
14. Boston College, 404
15. Wake Forest, 229

First-place votes in parenthesis; 155 total voters

Preseason All-ACC Team

First Team

Name, School, Points
Garrison Brooks, North Carolina, 137
Sam Hauser, Virginia, 89
Scottie Barnes, Florida State, 59
Jalen Johnson, Duke, 52
Chris Lykes, Miami, 50
Aamir Simms, Clemson, 50

Second Team

David Johnson, Louisville, 46
Jose Alvarado, Georgia Tech, 43
MJ Walker, Florida State, 38
Kiehi Clark, Virginia, 37
Wendell Moore Jr., Duke, 32

Preseason ACC Player of the Year

Garrison Brooks, North Carolina, 102
Sam Hauser, Virginia, 24
MJ Walker, Florida State, 10
Wendell Moore Jr., Duke, 7
Aamir Simms, Clemson, 5
Matthew Hurt, Duke, 3
Chris Lykes, Miami, 3
Kihei Clark, Virginia, 1

Preseason ACC Freshman of the Year

Scottie Barnes, Florida State, 64
Jalen Johnson, Duke, 60
Caleb Love, North Carolina, 9
Day'Ron Sharpe, North Carolina, 6
DJ Steward, Duke, 4
Reece Beekman, Virginia, 3
Jeremy Roach, Duke, 3
RJ Davis, North Carolina, 3
Mark Williams, Duke, 2
Cam Hayes, NC State, 1

PG Chris Lykes having 'great' offseason; named Preseason All-ACC

By Chris Stock
InsidetheU
Nov. 12, 2020

Point guard Chris Lykes has had a very good offseason as he gears up for his senior year.

Lykes, who ranks 24th on Miami's all-time scoring list, was named to the Preseason All-ACC First Team.

"He's playing the best basketball in practice," head coach Jim Larranaga said. "Will it convert to games? Surely hope so because he's had a great summer and fall and that's after knee surgery. He came back very, very strong. He rehabbed the knee, got himself in great shape, he's playing, very, very well."

Lykes averaged 15.4 points a game and increased his efficiency last season to lead the Hurricanes in scoring for the second straight year. However, Miami was 15-16 a year after going 14-18.

Wins, not personal accolades or accomplishments, are the focus for Lykes.

"I felt like I've had a solid career here at UM, but I think careers are always defined by winning," Lykes said. "Unfortunately I haven't won much here. I'm really just trying to win as many games as possible and that's how I'm going to end my career."

Lykes is seeing similarities with the 2020-21 Hurricanes, with newcomers Nysier Brooks, Earl Timberlake, and Matt Cross, to his freshman season when they went 22-10 and reached the NCAA Tournament.

"I think the closest comparison I can give to this year's team is my freshman year," Lykes said. "We have a lot of talented guys who can play a number of different positions. We've been working on a couple different things so the offense might be a little different, but it's really going to take some time for us to gel together. The way we've been playing in practice reminds me of the way Toronto plays and how the Rockets play."

Brooks is a 7-foot senior center who played on three NCAA Tournament teams at Cincinnati. He sat out last year at Miami and ready to make an impact on the court as a defensive prowess, but also as a key leader.

"He's a very vocal guy not afraid to insert his opinion," Lykes said. "Most of the time when he's inserting his opinion, it's the right way. He's not afraid to let guys know and that's something that I kind of look up to him for."

The addition of Brooks is much-needed on the defensive end of the court where the Hurricanes struggled last season. Miami ranked 12th in the ACC in conference-only defensive efficiency (105.5) according to Kenpom.com and 13th in rebounding margin (minus-3.6). Timberlake and Cross, two freshmen, are also expected to provide a defensive boost while the returners are aiming for improvements.

"I think it will be a different team defensively, better too," Lykes said. "I think we have solid rim protection in both Rod and Deng and Nysier Brooks. I think we definitely have rim protection, but I think we have guys who can guard a number of different positions. One of the focal points we have been doing in practice is picking up full court. I think we have the agility and speed to do that."

Lykes will be looking for a new backcourt mate after Dejan Vasiljevic graduated. Sophomores Isaiah Wong and Harlond Beverly are vying for the spot after showing flashes last season.

"The relationship between me, H, and Isaiah has been there since day one," Lykes said. "I feel like they look up to me. They ask me a lot of questions. They're good kids and I'm grateful to be able to teach them some things that I've learned in college. Relationship is great."

Lykes and Hurricanes, who were pegged seventh in the preseason ACC poll, are slated to begin their season on Nov. 29 against North Florida after their previously-announced opener on Nov. 25 against Stetson was postponed.

"I always believe we can go all the way," Lykes said. "Every team I have played on I felt like we can go all the way. It's just a matter of staying healthy and sticking to it. We're going to be alright this year, we just have to focus, and keep trusting."

Miami Hurricanes expect to rebound after two losing seasons

Associated Press
Nov. 13, 2020

MIAMI (AP) — Coach Jim Larranaga is coming off back-to-back losing seasons for the first time since 1991-93, and he knows why.

His Miami Hurricanes have had trouble guarding their opponents, especially in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

“We have been perhaps worst team in ACC defensively the past two seasons,” Larranaga said. “Some of it has to do with our lack of depth, some of it has to do with not being quite as big and talented as in my previous seasons.”

This season the Hurricanes are taller and deeper, and they hope to be better. Five of their top six scorers return from a team that went 15-16 last season, and at least three newcomers are expected to have significant roles.

BETTER D?

One of Miami's newcomers is 7-foot senior Nysier Brooks, a transfer who blocked 51 shots for Cincinnati a year ago and is eager to upgrade Miami's interior defense.

“I know a lot more people at this level intend to try me, so I'm going to focus on going vertical,” Brooks said. “A lot of people aren't going through me to finish, but there will be a lot of people that have athletic abilities, so I'm just waiting for them to come see. I'm planning on trying to get defensive player of the year in this conference.”

Regarding perimeter defense, senior guard Chris Lykes says several of his teammates are versatile enough for the Hurricanes to mix and match.

“It will be a different team defensively, and better, too,” Lykes said. “We have solid rim protection. We've also got guys who can guard a number of different positions. We have been picking up full court in practice, and I think we have the speed and agility to do that.”

ENTRENCHED

Larranaga, 71, is heading into his 35th year as a head coach and his 10th at Miami. He's under contract through 2023-24 and says he has no plans to retire, but acknowledged the past two seasons have been trying.

There was more frustration when forward Sam Waardenburg, Miami's leading rebounder a year ago, suffered a season-ending foot

injury in practice last month.

“Before,” Larranaga said, “when I was speaking to anyone from the media, I would say as long as we stay healthy, we should be in much better shape than we have been the last two seasons. But it a big blow to us to lose Sam.”

Larranaga has coached four NCAA Tournament teams at Miami, but the Hurricanes went 14-18 in 2018-19 — his first losing record since 1997-98 at George Mason. Last season was only slightly better, and the Hurricanes have lost 17 consecutive games to ranked teams since February 2018.

Larranaga blames the Hurricanes' downturn on an FBI investigation into college basketball that raised questions about his program and hurt recruiting. No wrongdoing by Larranaga surfaced.

MORE DEPTH

Recruiting struggles and injuries left the Hurricanes had only eight scholarship players for some games a year ago. This season the rotation could be 10 deep, even after the loss of Waardenburg.

“We can actually get in full practices now,” guard Kameron McGusty said.

Along with Brooks, newcomers include freshman guard Earl Timberlake and freshman forward Matt Cross. Deng Gak, a 6-11 junior, returns after missing most of last season with a knee injury.

The 6-5 Timberlake is among the mostly highly ranked recruits in Miami history.

“He is more physically ready than most freshmen,” Larranaga said. “He's strong and athletic and is going to be a major contributor from day one.”

LYKES

Lykes led Miami with an average of 15.4 points a year ago, and he's the third-leading returning scorer in the ACC. Putting up points isn't his primary goal, however.

“I'm trying to win as many games as I can,” Lykes said. “I feel like I've had a solid career here, but careers are always defined by winning. Unfortunately I haven't won much here.”

SCHEDULE

The opener against Stetson on Nov. 25 was postponed because of a COVID-19

case within the Hatters' program. Miami is now scheduled to play four non-conference games, beginning Nov. 29 at home against North Florida.

Because of the coronavirus, no fans will be permitted at home games through at least the end of December.

SG Kameron McGusty 'anxious' to show offseason improvements

By Chris Stock
InsidetheU
Nov. 17, 2020

Shooting guard Kameron McGusty put a strong emphasis on being a better-conditioned, two-way player for his upcoming senior season.

McGusty got in better shape by paying attention to his diet and improved his strength while becoming more athletic.

The 6-foot-5 Katy, Okla. native lost about seven pounds in the offseason down to 185. He also lowered his body fat percentage from 12 to eight.

"My body just feels better," McGusty said.

Head coach Jim Larranaga has noticed McGusty's transformation. One day at practice Larranaga called out to McGusty.

"That's the most athletic I've seen you since you arrived," Larranaga said.

McGusty responded: "It's the first year where my back is not bothering me."

McGusty's back limited him down the stretch last season, causing him to miss three games and relegating him to a reserve role in seven others. He averaged 12.5 points in his first season with the Hurricanes after two years at Oklahoma. He is hoping by improving his physical stature will translate to him being more reliable and more productive.

"I really took my body serious, changed my diet a little bit, started taking my off-court conditioning a little more important because to play good on both sides of the ball you've got to be in the right shape," McGusty said. "Those are some of the things I wanted to do last year, but I just realized I wasn't in good enough shape last year. That's the honest truth. So that's one of the things I worked on this offseason and I'm looking forward to being able to put it all together, get on the court and show it."

McGusty had the third-highest percentage (23.8) of possessions used last season with a 96.3 offensive rating according to Kenpom.com, noting his importance to the offensive end of the floor. He is looking to become more of a factor on defense as well.

"I wanted to make sure I was one of the most-conditioned guys on the team," McGusty said. "I handle the ball a lot in the offense, my job is to make plays for people so I have to be able to do that and withstand defensive game plans and different things teams throw at me,

but at the same time being able to guard one of the other team's better guards or the guard they like going through. It takes a lot of energy to be able to do it for 25-30 minutes and guarding as hard as you can."

There were a few key factors in improving his diet.

"In terms of my diet I've been cutting back on all of the sugar, not really drinking juices and sodas and sticking with water and putting the right stuff in my body, stuff that gives me energy as well as taking my vitamins," McGusty said. "Just all of the little things that you would forget about when you're at college that really does help give you more energy by putting the right stuff in your body and it makes you feel good. I'm glad that I made that change with my body and I'm anxious to show it."

McGusty is one of four seniors on the roster for the Hurricanes who open up their season on Nov. 29 against North Florida at the Watsco Center.

"It's definitely an advantage and we're embracing that advantage of having older guys, guys who have played and played in different conferences," McGusty said. "It's always good to have that experience just because any time there's a situation in a game, you could have three or four who have been there before so it's a lot easier and not as much nerves and pressure."

Miami Hurricanes men's basketball reschedules Stetson game to Dec. 4

Phillip Suitts
Palm Beach Post
Nov. 17, 2020

Miami Hurricanes men's basketball will play Stetson this season, but instead of the season opener, it will be team's second game of the season.

Miami was originally set to open the season against the Hatters on Nov. 25, but the game was postponed last week after a member of the Stetson basketball program tested positive for COVID-19.

Now, Miami will host Stetson on Friday, Dec. 4, at the Watsco Center. More details, including a tip-off time and TV broadcaster, will be announced at a later date.

Miami's new season opener is Nov. 29 against visiting North Florida. Tip-off is 6 p.m., and the game will be televised on the ACC Network.

It's all part of a five-game non-conference slate, all home games, that includes a Dec. 8 matchup against Purdue as part of the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

The Hurricanes open ACC play Dec. 16 against Pittsburgh and plan to play a 20-game conference schedule.

UM basketball team prepares for unique season under COVID protocols

By DAVID FURONES
SOUTH FLORIDA SUN SENTINEL
NOV 19, 2020

rañaga reported before shifting gears with a quip. "We have a whole lot of other issues. I'm dealing with kids that are 18-to-22 years old.

The Miami Hurricanes men's basketball team is preparing for its season opener, while the UM football team is on a two-week hiatus due to a COVID-19 outbreak and positive cases spiking on campus.

Coach Jim Larrañaga had a simple answer when asked about how the team is going to keep safe from the coronavirus this season, specifically when traveling.

"We're going to do everything the protocols ask for and do everything possible to keep our players and coaching staff and travel parties safe," Larrañaga said.

The Hurricanes, who open their season Nov. 29 at Watsco Center against North Florida, will fly charter for every away game. Players will have assigned seats on the plane and on team buses, sitting next to their roommates.

File photo of Miami Hurricanes men's basketball coach Jim Larranaga.

File photo of Miami Hurricanes men's basketball coach Jim Larranaga. (Miami Athletics)
Everybody will wear masks when traveling. They will not eat food while traveling so as to not remove masks. If someone needs to have a drink, they will sip through a straw under their mask.

At team hotels, players will room with their same roommates that they live with on campus. The Hurricanes won't have any sit-down meals together like they normally would in a banquet room. It will be boxed meals to go.

RELATED: Hurricanes look for turnaround basketball season, even without F Sam Waardenburg »

Per ACC protocols, all basketball teams will have to test three times a week on non-consecutive days to identify coronavirus cases and isolate those who test positive or who can be identified as being at risk due to contact tracing.

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Miami's basketball team has had success keeping COVID-19 away from the team in the preseason.

"We don't have any issues with COVID," Lar-

"We've had so many bumps and bruises and things that have kept us from having a full complement of players. It's been very difficult to practice correctly."

UM lost a starter for the season in redshirt senior power forward Sam Waardenburg. Fellow forward Anthony Walker, a sophomore, sprained his knee trying a 360-degree dunk. He missed a month of practice but has returned. Freshman guard Earl Timberlake sprained his ankle last Saturday. Rodney Miller had a medical issue related to allergies, and fellow redshirt senior center Nysier Brooks missed a practice this week while ill.

Portal Prowess

By Alex Schwartz
MiamiHurricanes.com
Nov. 19, 2020

CORAL GABLES, Fla. – Manny Diaz grew up cheering on the Miami Hurricanes. Not just the ones in helmets and shoulder pads, but also those on the hardwood.

A Magic City native, Diaz remembers watching the Hurricane men's basketball team back in the 1980s at the James L. Knight Center and Miami Arena.

"Rooting for the Hurricanes is something I've been doing for a large part of my life," Diaz said. "And the neat thing is when you do get to know the personalities and the coaches, like 'Coach L' and coach Caputo, and you see what solid people [they are] and how the program is on such solid ground over there, you always want to root for good people. When you've got good people at your hometown school, it makes it even more fun."

Now in his second year as the Miami head football coach after three seasons as defensive coordinator, Diaz continues to support the Hurricane basketball program.

He also picked up a tip early in his Miami tenure from Chris Caputo, Miami's associate head basketball coach, that has proved beneficial in shaping his team.

"When I first got here back in 2016, the topic of transfers came up with Chris and he mentioned how they had, had great success with transfers," Diaz recalled. "Transfers had not really become a big thing in college football yet, but it was coming. What Chris mentioned was how student-athletes are very often looking for different things after they've been in college for a couple years than when they are coming out of high school. And that Miami is a very, very attractive destination for someone with that mindset."

Few college football programs have embraced the transfer portal like Miami, but the basketball program was, as Diaz alluded to, years ahead.

When Jim Larrañaga, with Caputo at his side, came to Coral Gables in 2011, the Miami roster featured a trio of transfers who helped teach Caputo the lesson he would eventually relay to Diaz a few years later.

"I've always felt like Miami is such a great location for transfers. We sort of learned it a little bit early on when we inherited Kenny Kadji and Trey McKinney Jones and Malcolm Grant," Caputo said. "Those guys were older, mature, good players—all-conference level players. And then we started to figure out, the ... environment here may be a little bit more conducive to a guy who's older."

The Hurricanes' interest in bolstering their roster through transfers only intensified after Larrañaga had a conversation with Fred Hoiberg, then the head coach at Iowa State.

The Cyclones, at that point, were utilizing transfers like almost no other team in the nation and they were doing so quite effectively.

"He shared with me his philosophy about recruiting transfers," Larrañaga said. "And the way he explained it was, 'I don't think we're going to be able to beat Kansas or Texas or some of the other high-profile programs in our league for a McDonald's All-American, but I think if we have older guys—juniors and seniors—dominating our roster, that we have a good chance to be very competitive.' Because a 21- or 22-year-old will play with a great deal of confidence against an 18-year-old, no matter how talented that guy is."

Larrañaga quickly picked up arguably the best transfer in Miami basketball history, landing Shane Larkin from DePaul. The guard from Orlando, Fla., went on to be the ACC Player of the Year in 2012-13, helping the Hurricanes sweep the league titles and reach the Sweet 16 that season.

From there, the staff continued to stay on the lookout for more transfers who could come in and make an impact. After that successful 2012-13 campaign, they added Sheldon McClellan from Texas and Angel Rodriguez from Kansas State.

Those two helped guide Miami to another Sweet 16 berth in 2016 on a roster that also included Kamari Murphy and Ivan Cruz Uceda, who joined the Hurricanes from Oklahoma State and Harcum College, respectively, in 2014.

Those are just a few of the many transfers Larrañaga, Caputo and the Hurricanes have utilized during their time in Coral Gables.

"The combination of being older, more experienced and, in some cases, having a year off where they could really work to develop their games and become the type of players that we felt like they could be, [all of that helped]," Caputo said of why trans-

fers have worked so well for Miami. "And then it was a way to supplement your high school recruiting, where you set out to get a certain amount of high school players, you try to get guys that you feel like can make an impact at this level. If you go three-of-five like most people, or three-of-seven, then you need [to give out] two more scholarships. Instead of dropping down in terms of tier of high school recruit, you supplement with a transfer."

Both Larrañaga and Diaz feel their success with past transfers has helped them sign new ones. Diaz has even had former ones connect with players of interest in the portal.

The draw for older players to come to Coral Gables goes well beyond that, though, regardless of the sport.

"The way that I think it through is when they're coming out of high school and they can be really influenced by a 48-hour unofficial or official visit, you can make anything look like it's amazing in 48 hours," Diaz shared. "I think when they really spend time on a college campus somewhere and then they come see everything that Miami has to offer, I think at that point, I think they really understand that this is a great, great place; not just a great school and a place where you can compete for championships, but a great environment to live in. We can really increase your brand, which is so important now."

Many of the attributes that make Miami an excellent spot to be appeal to recruits of all ages, both at the prep and collegiate level.

To Caputo, those positives are just heightened when it comes to an individual with less time left remaining to make the most of a college student-athlete experience.

"Miami is a great location for all sports for high school students. That's never going to change," Caputo said. "The best high school athletes in the country in any sport should consider Miami for a number of reasons. But in addition to that, we think it's a uniquely great situation for transfers, as well."

While colleges recruit high school players for years before landing a commitment, they sometimes have just weeks, or even days, to garner the pledge of a transfer. Although the evaluation process is sped up, it remains imperative for the coaches to fully vet the players they are going after to ensure they are a fit.

Sometimes—such as in the case of Murphy—the coaches already know the player and have a relationship from pursuing him in high school. Other times—like with Rodriguez, Zach Johnson, Keith Stone and Joe Thomas—it is a local recruit whom the staff is well aware of and has connections to.

No matter the situation, though, the coaches do their due diligence before bringing in a new player, even in a warp-speed recruitment.

"You have to do a lot of research. You have to talk to a lot of people—people who have been around that person. You have to find out what they're looking for, you have to find out why they're leaving the place that they came from," Diaz explained. "And you have to find the right fit. This is not fantasy football where you're just adding stats to your team. You're adding a person to your locker room and if they're not the right person, it could have a negative effect. We've been right more than we've been wrong, but that's something we're always very conscious of."

When the assessment is indeed correct, the transfers have the ability to not only help on the court/field, but also off it. Diaz cites the players he refers to as Miami's first high-profile transfer and most recent high-profile transfer to demonstrate the type of impact older players can have outside of the stat sheet.

The former is Adrian Colbert, a defensive back who came from Texas in 2016, and the latter is D'Eriq King, who joined the team from Houston this year and is currently its starting quarterback.

"We were trying to rebrand what it meant to play defensive back at Miami from 2015 to 2016. We were trying to set a [new level] of toughness in our secondary and bringing in Adrian Colbert and the toughness ... and physicality that he played with, I thought inspired all of the other defensive backs," Diaz said. "And then, fast-forward to this year, bringing in D'Eriq King and, in addition to all of his hats on the field, just who he is off the field and his leadership and his ability to connect with everybody in the locker room has transformed our team into a much more [tightly-knit group] than we were a year ago."

The third player in ACC history to throw for 400 yards and rush for 100 yards in a single game, King is part of an extremely talented group of transfers on Miami's football roster now.

King owns three ACC Quarterback of the Week accolades, while Jaelan Phillips (UCLA) has two ACC Defensive Lineman of the Week plaudits and Quincy Roche (Temple) sports one. Bubba Bolden (USC) is a two-time ACC Defensive Back of the Week and Jose Borregales (FIU) has one ACC Specialist of the Week distinction.

"I think for them, it's always going to be about the 305, the tri-county area, the state of Florida," Caputo said. "But transfers have been a wonderful way, it looks, for them to supplement their roster."

The Miami basketball program, too, has once again supplemented its own roster with transfers. Three of the Hurricanes' 12 scholarship players began their careers at other Division I schools.

One of them, Kameron McGusty, made a big impact last year in his first season after sitting out. The former Oklahoma Sooner averaged 12.5 points and 4.0 rebounds per game in 2019-20, scoring 20-plus four times for the Hurricanes.

Caputo thinks the Katy, Texas, native could be poised for a McClellan-esque redshirt senior season. Larrañaga, in part due to McGusty's clean bill of health after dealing with multiple injuries over the past two years, also feels the 6-foot-5, 190-pound guard is in for a big campaign.

"Right now, he's shooting the ball the best [he has] since he's been here," Larrañaga said. "He has gotten himself in great shape. He's running the floor and has shown more consistent athletic ability. He's certainly more experienced in our offensive and defensive schemes. So, I think he's heading towards an outstanding senior year."

Nysier Brooks, who came to The U from Cincinnati, is set to take the court for Miami this year after sitting out the 2019-20 season.

A 7-foot, 240-pound redshirt senior center from Philadelphia, Brooks will aid the Hurricanes in some areas the team struggled last year.

"Nysier is very strong, has a great physical presence. He's also very much a vocal leader. He loves to talk on defense," Larrañaga shared. "He's a really popular player amongst his teammates because he's so friendly and engaging. Nas is someone we're counting on to be a major contributor at the defensive end of the floor and in rebounding at both ends of the floor. We think he can be an outstanding receiver of bounce passes and lob passes in around the basketball that could lead to dunks. We're also working very hard with him on his jump hook so he has a bread-and-butter shot and a bread-and-butter move to get that shot so he can contribute mightily at the offensive end. But his greatest contribution is going to be the energy he brings every day."

One transfer whom Hurricane fans will not see on the court this year is Elijah Olaniyi, who joined the team this summer from Stony Brook. A 6-foot-5, 205-pound senior guard Olaniyi will redshirt this season in accordance with NCAA transfer rules.

Although the Newark, N.J., native might not be appearing in games in 2020-21, he is still expected to have an impact on the team's success.

"First of all, Elijah is kind of the same size of the players that we've had that have enjoyed so much success. Starting with Durand Scott and Rion Brown, a Sheldon McClellan, a Davon Reed, Bruce Brown, Lonnie Walker," Larrañaga said. "They're all in that 6'5, 6'6 range with long arms, great jumping ability, have the ability to shoot the three, but are also good going to the basket. He's a very serious competitor."

"He gives a great effort every day in practice and we're going to need that because the teams we play in the ACC are so gifted at that position, we need Elijah to kind of be the best player for our opponent in preparation for that game," Larrañaga continued. "I think he's going to provide that. With a year of experience under his belt, I think he'll be ready to really contribute next year."

With transfers playing a pivotal role for both the Miami football and basketball programs, it is clear the conversation Diaz and Caputo had years ago has proven correct and both individuals have recognized just that.

"As time has gone on," Diaz said, "we've probably had some conversations where we circle back to that initial talk and the affirmation that, that was true."

2020-21 Miami men's basketball preview

Duke Chronicle
Nov. 20, 2020

Head coach: Jim Larrañaga

Tenure at Miami: 10th season

Career coaching record: 632-422

Home court: Watsco Center

Starters: G Chris Lykes, G Kameron McGusty, G Isaiah Wong, F Rodney Miller Jr., C Nysier Brooks

Bench: G Harlond Beverly, F Anthony Walker, F Deng Gak, G Willie Herenton, F Matt Cross, G Earl Timberlake, F Sam Waardenburg

Overview: Last season's run was only slightly better than the year before for Jim Larrañaga and the Miami Hurricanes. Finishing with just one more win in a season cut short, the Hurricanes found a few players they can build around this year. Returning senior guards Chris Lykes and Kameron McGusty were injured at various points throughout last season, but both averaged over 10 points per game when they played. Joining those two are five more returning players, a key for chemistry that is seen much less often in the one-and-done era. Unfortunately for Miami, redshirt senior Sam Waardenburg will miss the whole season with a foot injury. Waardenburg was keyed up to earn the starting position and was expected to play a key role as the team's main rebounder. That production will have to be found elsewhere, possibly through Cincinnati transfer, center Nysier Brooks.

Miami has a decent chance to make some noise in the ACC this year with this returning group. Offensively, they were already very talented. With key transfers like Brooks, as well as two four-star recruits, expect a better performance than last year.

Team ceiling: Don't expect a Cinderella run to the Final Four for this team. But if they do come together to the best of their ability, they could make it as far as the Round of 32.

Team floor: The absolute bottom of this team's expectations should be toward the cellar of this year's strong ACC competition, and around a 12 seed in the NCAA tournament.

PF Anthony Walker appears to have edge in earning starting nod

By Chris Stock
InsidetheU
Nov. 20, 2020

There have been four players competing for the starting power forward spot after Sam Waardenburg went down with a season-ending injury.

It appears Anthony Walker has the edge of earning the nod when the Hurricanes open up their season on Nov. 29 against North Florida.

Walker, an athletic 6-foot-9 Baltimore native, missed four weeks of preseason practices with a knee sprain, but has since returned and head coach Jim Larranaga hinted Walker could be the starter, praising him ahead of the rest of the other three.

"Thank goodness Anthony is back now and looks very good," Larranaga said on ACC Network's Packer and Durham on Friday. "I think he'll have a good sophomore year, but he's still very, very inexperienced."

Deng Gak, Matt Cross, and guard Earl Timberlake are also options with Walker being the most experienced after playing in 25 games last season.

Even if Walker begins the season as the starter, he will have to be more productive and efficient on both ends of the court than he was last season to stay in the starting lineup after averaging 3.3 points on 40.5-percent shooting to go with 2.5 rebounds in 12.3 minutes last year. He had an offensive rating of 94.1 and defensive rating of 102.9 points per 100 possessions making his minus-8.8 points the third-lowest on the team.

Larranaga discussed his thoughts on the backcourt, which figures to be the strength of this year's team.

"Chris Lykes is a dynamo," Larranaga said. "He's a high-octane scorer, a very entertaining player, very acrobatic, he can shoot the 3 from very long range, he's got an assortment of layups and pull-up jump shot that really make him hard to guard, but he's not alone. We've got a very experienced backcourt with Kam McGusty, Isaiah Wong, and Harlond joining him plus our freshman standout Earl Timberlake so we have five guards. If they can stay healthy, we can have a very good backcourt."

Larranaga then detailed his outlook of the frontcourt:

"A few weeks ago I was really confident with Nysier Brooks and Rodney Miller at the five,

Sam Waardenburg, Anthony Walker, and Matt Cross at the four and then add Deng Gak, he can play both positions, so we were looking awfully good and then all of a sudden Sam Waardenburg goes down," Larranaga said. "He just stepped on someone's foot. He ends up having surgery and he's out for the season. He's our most experienced frontcourt player, our best defensive frontcourt player, our leading returning rebounder so other guys have to step up to fill his shoes."

Lykes, Wong, and McGusty are the likely starters in the backcourt with Brooks at center.

The Hurricanes will hold an intrasquad scrimmage at the Watsco Center on Saturday in preparation for their Nov. 29 season opener against North Florida.

Matt Cross eyeing key role in first year

By Chris Stock
InsidetheU
Nov. 22, 2020

It could be something, it could be nothing.

Either way, Matt Cross is expected to contribute in his first season with the Hurricanes.

Cross, who has been in a battle for a starting position, played with the White Team in Saturday's closed intraquad scrimmage, which featured four other projected starters.

It could be a sign that he, and not Anthony Walker, who had missed four weeks with a knee sprain, oft-injured Deng Gak, or talented freshman guard Earl Timberlake, will be a starter when the Hurricanes open their season on Nov. 29 against North Florida.

Cross is a 6-foot-7, 225-pound forward from Beverly, Mass. known offensively for his shooting ability, which is much-needed for the league's worst 3-point shooting team last season.

"Matt Cross is an outstanding shooter," head coach Jim Larranaga said.

Cross also brings toughness and rebounding to the defensive end—again, two areas of improvement needed for the Hurricanes after being one of the league's worst in both categories last year.

"One of the things that we're hoping is that our two freshmen, Earl Timberlake and Matt Cross, as well as Nysier Brooks will give us a great effort on the defensive end of the floor helping with individual defense, team defense, and rebounding," Larranaga said. "That will make a big difference because it will give us a little more size. I think we'll miss DJ Vasiljevic's shooting and Keith Stone's defense and rebounding, but hopefully with the three additional guys it'll more than make up for those two."

Cross averaged averaged 18.6 points, 10.0 rebounds and 3.0 assists per game as a senior at Brewster Academy, which finished 37-3. It was his fourth high school in four years. He was a four-star prospect who was considered the 18th-best small forward and 87th-best overall prospect according to the 247Sports composite rankings.

He had a productive summer in 2029 playing for BABC in the Nike EYBL, averaging 23.3 points (seventh), 9.5 rebounds (sixth), 2.7 assists and 1.6 steals a game. Only current NBAers DeAndre Ayton, Marvin Bagley, RJ Barrett, Miles Bridges and Michael Porter

Jr. also ranked in the top 10 in scoring and rebounding.

Senior shooting guard Kameron McGusty has been impressed with Cross and Timberlake.

"Very talented freshmen," McGusty said. "From the moment they came in, they had the respect from me and all of the other guys on the team. They're hard-workers, they're going to help us out a lot this year and I'm excited to be on the court with them."

Chris Lykes, Isaiah Wong, McGusty, and Nysier Brooks were also on the White Team according to photographs released by the university. Harlond Beverly, Rodney Miller, Anthony Walker, and Deng Gak were seen on the Orange Team.

University of Miami basketball: Men look to return to NCAA Tournament while women seek breakthrough

By Cory Nightingale
Palm Beach Post
Nov. 24, 2020

For University of Miami men's basketball coach Jim Larranaga, the coronavirus pandemic has not only upended his professional career, but also his personal life.

The longtime coach, who has been at UM since 2011, has been rocked by COVID-19, losing both a friend and a former player to the respiratory disease. But he's still ready to coach basketball this winter, altered schedule and all.

"It's a very dangerous virus," Larranaga said during UM basketball's virtual media day on Oct. 30. "Our players have been very, very smart dealing with it so far. But you can't let down your guard, especially with there being more and more cases diagnosed each day. Instead of this going away, it's getting worse. And we want to keep ourselves safe so we can really have a basketball season."

The season starts in less than a week, with a home game Sunday against North Florida. But even that has been changed. The original season opener against Stetson was postponed to Dec. 4 following a positive COVID test within the Hatters program earlier this month.

And since Larranaga's comments in October, cases, hospitalizations and deaths have continued to rise in Florida.

"I'm very, very proud of our guys with the way they've handled it so far," Larranaga said then. "But we've almost been in our own bubble. Our practice facility has been limited to our players, our coaches and a couple of managers. And that's it. And they've all been tested. At one time, it was once a week. Now it's twice a week."

The Hurricanes won't have to leave the friendly confines of Coral Gables until mid-December, although fans won't be allowed to attend games. UM is, however, leaving open the possibility of having fans at games in 2021.

UM opens the season with six home games, including hosting Purdue on Dec. 8 as part of the ACC/Big Ten Challenge. The Canes also begin conference play at home, against Pittsburgh on Dec. 16, before concluding the five-game non-conference schedule against Jacksonville three days later.

After March Madness was cancelled last year — one of the first big events to be affected by

the pandemic — Larranaga and his players are hoping for an unaltered postseason.

"As long as we're smart about who we interact with when we're not at practice, I think we can stay safe," said Larranaga. "But when you're dealing with teenagers and young adults who already have been basically quarantined since last March, you got guys maybe with COVID fatigue. And will they, you know, go out and interact with people? So we need to be very, very diligent and be on our toes throughout this entire school year."

Along with the five non-conference games, Miami will play 20 ACC games, 10 at home and 10 on the road. That includes six games against teams ranked in the top 25 of the preseason USA Today Sports coaches poll, including a home-and-away with No. 16 North Carolina and No. 18 Florida State.

On the court, the Hurricanes will lean on senior guard Chris Lykes, a preseason All-ACC first-team selection, as they look to get back to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2018. Lykes averaged 15.4 points per game last season and is the first Hurricane to earn multiple preseason All-ACC honors (he was preseason second-team last year).

But UM will be without 6-foot-10 forward Sam Waardenburg, who was lost for the season with a left foot injury sustained in practice. The senior from Auckland, New Zealand, was a major shot-blocking presence.

"He was our most experienced frontcourt player, our leading rebounder from last season, he was practicing extremely well and we're going to dramatically miss his defense, his rebounding, his experience and just his overall demeanor on the court. He was someone that did a lot of things for us," Larranaga said. Sophomore Anthony Walker, freshman Matt Cross and junior Deng Gak are competing for Waardenburg's starting power forward position. Gak can also help at center along with 7-foot Cincinnati transfer Nysier Brooks.

While just 5-7, Lykes is the Canes' savvy floor general and led the team in scoring, assists and steals last season. But he cares about just one number in his last run in Coral Gables.

"I'm not necessarily trying to stand out. I'm really just trying to win as many games as I can," said Lykes, who got a taste of the NCAA tournament as a freshman in 2018 before the Canes finished with losing records the past two seasons. "Yes, I've felt like I had a solid career here at UM, but I think careers are always defined by winning. Unfortunately, I

haven't won much here, so if that's standing out, then I'm going to do what it takes to stand out. But that's in tune with winning. I'm really just trying to win as many games as possible. That's how I'm going to end my career."

In the preseason poll, the Hurricanes were tabbed to finish seventh in the ACC.

While Larranaga leans on Lykes in the hopes of staying competitive in the always-stacked ACC, Canes women's coach Katie Meier hopes this is the year her team can translate its consistent regular-season success into a deep run in March.

"I think that we need to break through the second weekend, third weekend of March. That's obviously something that we're trying to do. But overall, I think the 100 percent graduation rate and 10 straight postseasons is pretty impressive. The culture is good," said Meier, who's run up a gaudy .610 winning percentage in 15 seasons at UM but has never guided the Canes past the second round of the NCAA tournament.

The senior guard duo of Endia Banks and Kelsey Marshall will try to help change that. They've got one more shot.

The Canes' chances took a blow Tuesday when it was announced fellow senior guard Mykea Gray was out for the season after suffering an ACL injury in practice.

Still, Meier has a truly international team with five players from France, Croatia, Spain and Sweden. The pandemic gave the group a chance to bond more than it would have in a normal setting.

And junior forward Destiny Harden turned the gym into her personal playground during the pandemic. Meier thinks that work will show once the season starts.

"She was hungry," said Meier. "When it was like, when can we come back, she was the one that was saying, coach, I need a place to work out, I want to lift. And that's when the university didn't make it mandatory but they made the facilities and everything available in July for the basketballs, and a lot of people couldn't get back yet, but Destiny was the first up, like, let's go.

"She was frustrated not having anywhere to work out. And it shows. She's just really active and she's playing really well."

Men's and Women's Basketball: How High Are Their Hardwood Ceilings This Winter?

Wyatt Kopleman
State of the U
Nov. 24, 2020

The Miami Hurricanes men's and women's basketball programs have worked relentlessly in their own bubbles at the Watsco Center, while everything both inside and outside their controlled environment appears a tad different.

Coaches wear masks in practice, players sit so distant from each other that they appear separated, and an on-campus march in light of the ongoing Black Lives Matter and voter registration movements have all been on the minds of all.

"I think (given) the flexibility we saw in the football schedule this week in the changes, I'm guessing we're going to have to make those same type of changes in basketball," said Miami's Director of Athletics Blake James, who has already endured a scheduling change for the school's final three football games due to COVID-19 cases.

James also noted that basketball could potentially be one of the university's most difficult athletic programs offered this school year, given the close contact

Aside from simmering concerns over potentially rescheduled games and how Canes fans will perceive social justice advocacy approaches, preseason preparation has remained in full swing as both teams will begin competition in an empty Watsco Center later this week.

"For us, the energy needs to come within the team," said UM women's basketball coach Katie Meier. The former AP National Coach of the Year will officially begin her 16th season coaching the program on Wednesday against Jacksonville of the Atlantic Sun Conference.

"We have got to play with joy, and we have got to play without feeling burdened. It's an unburdened time in the two and three hours that we're together in practice. When we have a chance to share our joy (throughout the season), people are going to want to see us being so grateful and happy to be playing."

Men's basketball coach Jim Larrañaga and his team conducted an intrasquad scrimmage on Saturday as a way to prepare his unit for the silence of the Watsco Center, as opposed to the rambunctious crowd of an opponent's arena like Duke's or North Carolina's.

"There will be an adjustment for the players," Larrañaga told the media last Wednesday. "I

do think it can impact the homecourt advantage. But every player on both teams will be dealing with the same thing. You have to be self-motivated; you can't wait for the crowd to get you going. I'll also be very curious about the creativity that we see around the league."

But when both the men's and women's programs do in fact step on the hardwood, what will their ceilings resemble for the season? Both teams lost to Clemson in the early frames of the ACC Tournament, after beating both Tigers teams during the regular season.

Meier's crew lost forward Beatrice Mompremier to the WNBA Draft this spring, while coach Jim Larrañaga's program saw sharpshooter guard DJ Vasiljevic return to Sydney, Australia, to play professionally in the NBL (National Basketball League) and Keith Stone to compete overseas in Luxembourg.

What both teams do also share is returning talent, however. The men's team has seven returning players (not including an injured forward in redshirt senior Sam Waardenburg), while the women's program returns 10 players from last season.

Senior guards including Chris Lykes and Mykea Gray have not trekked past the quarterfinals of the ACC Tournament since 2018, when Larrañaga's team lost to North Carolina and Meier's fell to Florida State.

Veteran leadership will likely carry both teams to a further finish line than they've been accustomed to in recent years, should incoming talent need a full season to adjust to the college level. If you take a look back to that season, men's basketball had Ja'Quan Newton, Bruce Brown, and Dewan Hernandez, while the Lady Canes retained forwards Keyanna Harris and Erykah Davenport, plus a junior in Beatrice Mompremier.

A similar level of that experience will potentially serve both squads well heading into another season loaded with an additional concentration of ACC games. Women's basketball opens their season Wednesday with four non-conference teams in Jacksonville, Stetson, North Florida, and Florida Atlantic visiting Coral Gables, Fla. Men's basketball will face the first of those three opponents, too, with the additions of Stetson and Purdue (ACC/Big Ten Challenge).

Some believe the men's team will look stronger than what the women will have to offer this winter. Four-star recruits in guard Earl Timberlake and forward Matt Cross have plenty of athleticism and shot-making abilities to potentially help lift the Canes into the up-

per echelon of the ACC. Such success has not been witnessed since Lonnie Walker and Bruce Brown departed in 2018, when Miami finished in third place (11-7) in the conference.

Though that perception may prove to be valid, Meier's team has no reason not to believe that their talent infusions can thrive as well. Freshman forward Nyayongah Gony and junior college transfer Naomi Mbandu, a forward originally from France, have brought their work ethic to the gym thus far, and have received praise from the veterans. Miami's last glimpse of success in March Madness time arose when they hosted the No. 5 seeded Arizona State Sun Devils at the Watsco Center and lost by two points.

Each team's thirst for regained success in both the ACC and NCAA Tournaments realistically could come to fruition in March, should they be able to finish no lower than fifth in the conference and receive at-large bids. 11 wins (or even an additional one or two) each should do the trick, and remaining healthy will remain of utmost importance, per usual with Miami as the two teams battled injuries last year.

Miami Hurricanes men's basketball projected record: 17-8 (12-8 ACC)

Miami Hurricanes women's basketball projected record: 13-11 (9-11 ACC)

Comparing Nysier Brooks to former Miami C Tonye Jekiri

By Chris Stock
Inside The U
Nov. 24, 2020

Cincinnati transfer center Nysier Brooks is expected to make an instant impact for the Hurricanes this season as they open up Sunday (6:00 p.m., ACCN) against North Florida. The 7-footer is known for his defensive prowess and has also been praised by teammates and coaches for his leadership—two key areas missing on last year's team.

With Brooks bringing a defensive game to the frontcourt, he could have a similar impact as former Miami center Tonye Jekiri, a reserve as a freshman on the Hurricanes' ACC championship team in 2013 who went on to be a two-time member of the All-ACC Defensive Team.

Here's how the two compare in various categories in their careers:

DEFENSIVE RATING

Jekiri had a career-best 94.7 defensive rating during his junior season in 2014-15 when he played the most minutes (30.3 a game) and had his best statistical season. The defensive rating is an estimate of how many points a player allowed in 100 possessions. Jekiri had a rating of under 100 each of his four seasons and finishing his career with a 96.7.

Brooks has a lower career defensive rating at 92.4 over his three seasons at Cincinnati. He had a 94.6 rating in his lone season as a starter in 2018-19, averaging 22.9 minutes a game. His lowest rating came as a sophomore with an 85.3 as he averaged 9.7 minutes over 35 games.

BLOCKS AND REBOUNDS

Jekiri averaged a career-best 1.4 blocks per game as a junior and had 126 blocks in 139 games over his career as he ranks sixth on Miami's career list. He averaged 1.7 blocks per 40 minutes in his career with his best mark of 1.9 coming as a freshman. Three of his four seasons he had a block percent of at least 5.0.

Brooks averaged 1.5 blocks a game as a junior and has 93 blocks in 103 games. He has blocked more shots per 40 minutes at 2.6 over his career with a high of 3.2 as a freshman. He has had two seasons with a block percent over 8.0 including 8.4 as a junior.

While Brooks has been a better shot-blocker, Jekiri has the edge in rebounding. Jekiri led the ACC in rebounding as a junior, averaging

9.9 a game, and averaged 6.5 over his career, 11.8 per 40 minutes. His defensive rebounding percent of 25.7 as a junior ranked 24th nationally.

Brooks averaged 6.3 rebounds a game as a junior and has averaged 10.0 per 40 minutes over his career. His defensive rebounding percent was 19.4 as a junior.

FOULS

Jekiri was foul-prone as a freshman, averaging 6.0 fouls per 40 minutes, but he improved in that area lowering the mark to 4.9, 4.1, and 4.3 over his next three seasons as he finished his career at 4.5.

Brooks has cut down on his fouls each season and will need to make another drop as a senior especially if he intends to play closer to 30 minutes a game. Brooks averaged 5.7 fouls per 40 minutes as a junior, which was down from 7.9 as a freshman and 6.4 as a sophomore. He has averaged 6.3 fouls per 40 minutes over his career.

FINAL OVERVIEW

Both players have proven to be good defensive players in their careers, particularly in pick-and-roll situations and with switching in man-to-man defense. They were catalysts on good defensive teams. Jekiri was a better rebounder while Brooks has been a better shot-blocker with a better defensive rating.

Brooks has a chance to prove himself against better competition in the ACC and has his eyes set on being the ACC Defensive Player of the Year, something Jekiri fell short of as he finished second as a senior in 2015-16.

C Nysier Brooks aiming for ACC Defensive Player of the Year

By Chris Stock
InsidetheU
Nov. 24, 2020

Senior center Nysier Brooks is confident in his defensive abilities.

Brooks is a much-needed addition after the Hurricanes were one of the league's worst defensive teams last season. He hopes his rebounding, shot-blocking abilities, and vocal leadership will pay dividends in his first season with the Hurricanes after three years at Cincinnati.

"I plan on trying to get Defensive Player of the Year in this conference," said Brooks, who is slated to make his team debut with Miami in the opener on Sunday (6:00 p.m., ACCN) against North Florida.

The 7-foot center averaged 8.1 points, 6.3 rebounds, and 1.5 blocks a game with a defensive rating of 94.6 in his final season with the Bearcats in 2018-19. He believes there will be a transition to playing in the ACC compared to the AAC.

"I know a lot more people at this level will attempt to try me so I'm just focused on going vertical," Brooks said. "I know a lot of people aren't going through me to finish like that, but there will be a lot of people who have athletic abilities so I'm just waiting for them to come see me."

Brooks will be anchoring a defense that ranked 12th in the ACC in conference-only defensive efficiency (105.5) according to Kenpom.com and 13th in rebounding margin (minus-3.6) as the Hurricanes finished 15-16 for their second consecutive losing season.

"He's very vocal and I think that's going to really help us defensively," head coach Jim Larranaga said. "I was really counting on he and Sam (Waardenburg) because Sam's a good defender and I think Nysier is going to be a very good defender and rebounder for us. I think he'll block some shots. Because he's so big and strong I think he'll be a factor at both ends of the court."

When Brooks was at Cincinnati, the Bearcats were the most efficient defensive team in the AAC for two of the three seasons Brooks was on campus and third in the other year.

Brooks believes the Hurricanes will be a better defensive team this season compared to a year ago.

"I don't think a lot teams are going to really want to come in there like that, to come score,

to be honest with you because our rotations are getting a lot better," Brooks said.

Versatility will be a key as the Hurricanes have been working on being a team that can be effective in switching with all five positions while playing man-to-man defense, a key when facing teams that use a lot of pick-and-rolls and screens.

"We'll be real good at being able to adjust to different teams that have different play-styles like playing fast tempo or slow tempo," Brooks said. "I know that we'll be good to adjust to any type of game situation with the players we have. We can switch one through five if we need to or we can go small if we need to or go big if we need to. I think we'll be very versatile."

A key in being able to switch effectively is communication and that is an area of strength for Brooks as he has taken on a leadership role with the team on and off the court.

"I come from a big family so I know how to deal with a lot of different personalities or characters as I like to call it," he said. "It's not really that hard. I just try to treat everybody like brothers and make sure they know that how I say it doesn't really matter. I'm just trying to get my teammates to understand because I might see different stuff and they may see different stuff so I try to build different ways of communication between everybody so I try to communicate all of the time. You might say something with a meaner tone in the heat of the moment, but the guys know I'm very vocal and they can trust what I say. I wouldn't put them in the wrong spot. I just try to bring toughness to the team, leadership, and be a glue guy—somebody that everybody can play with and likes to play with. If there's a job one of my teammates needs me to do, I want them to know they can always count on me."

Senior point guard Chris Lykes has noticed the impact of Brooks.

"He's a very vocal guy, not afraid to insert his opinion," Lykes said. "Most of the time when he's inserting his opinion, it's the right way. He's not afraid to let guys know and that's something I kind of look up to him for."

Brooks is known for his defensive prowess, but he should provide a boost on offense as well. He shot 53.5 percent from the floor in his final season at Cincinnati and has made 52.4 percent over his career.

"I feel like I'll be a presence on the offensive side of the ball and the defensive side of the

ball," he said. "Teams will have to guard me so that will leave room for my teammates as we have a lot of guards who can go. I feel we can complement each other because you can't double any one of us, you have to play straight up."

Miller's Time

By Alex Schwartz
MiamiHurricanes.com
Nov. 25, 2020

CORAL GABLES, Fla. – Through his first two seasons with the University of Miami men's basketball team, Rodney Miller Jr., was a little-used backup.

The 7-foot center, despite his imposing physical presence, totaled just 32 points and 16 rebounds in 30 appearances for the Hurricanes.

"That was a big learning experience for me, really just to figure out what I could do to perform and be a valuable asset to the team. And it came [down] to being patient with myself and the coaching staff being patient with me, as well, and working on myself to get better," Miller said. "Really, having the mindset to get better every single day. That really pushed me to excel and work my butt off. It was a challenge, it was a struggle, but with the faith that the coaching staff and I had in myself, [as well as that from] my parents and family, I was able to just put my head down and work. I feel like that's what you really need to do if you really want something bad enough."

Miller wanted so much to get better that he did something quite rare in his sport; he took a mid-career redshirt.

Unlike football, redshirts in college basketball are not overly common and most are due to injury or transfer. Many players who do take elective redshirts do so at the start of their career, not in the middle.

After conversations with the coaching staff, Miller, however, willingly redshirted during the 2018-19 campaign. He understood that, even if the move was not one frequently done by others, it would be beneficial for him.

That was all that mattered.

"That was a huge decision in my life. One thing for me that I was sure about was my own conviction. Once I made the decision, I was going to stick with it. The decision I made, at the time, was solely based on ... the best interests of the team and myself," Miller shared. "...I was making the decision to redshirt just based off knowing my body, to figure myself out. I knew that year would help me become the player I'm coming into now. So, I think it was important for me to take that year off."

Soon after Miller and the coaching staff made the choice for him to redshirt, the team's roster began to shrink for a variety of reasons, injury and otherwise.

The Hurricanes played nearly the entire season with just seven healthy scholarship players, as their three-year NCAA Tournament streak came to an end.

Nonetheless, even with numbers dwindling, everyone in the program remained steadfast in the initial call for Miller to sit out as a redshirt. That included by Miller and head coach Jim Larrañaga.

"He was working so hard to get his weight down and to really improve his conditioning," Larrañaga said. "We didn't feel like he could do both, actually play in the games and keep himself in the kind of shape [he needed to be in]. That may sound contradictory, but it's not easy to lose 30 pounds and so that was really the focus: his diet, his conditioning. We kept it that way and it worked out very well because when Ebuka [Izundu] and Dewan [Hernandez] were gone, Rodney moved into the starting lineup and was very impactful last year."

It did indeed pay off, as Miller returned to action in 2019-20 and made his presence felt throughout the season. He averaged 7.2 points and 5.5 rebounds per game, appearing in 30 of 31 contests with 28 starts.

To get to that point, though, Miller had to put in a great deal of effort off the court. He totally reworked his diet, committing to eating three portioned, clean meals per day and not snacking at night. He also cut back on carbohydrates and sugars, as well as increased his water intake.

Beyond that, Miller, self-described as "not a morning person," began to wake up around 6 a.m. each day. He would run sprints, hop on the treadmill or just start moving around to be active and get his metabolism going.

It took a consistent commitment each and every day for Miller to get in the physical shape necessary for him to play the way he did when he returned to the hardwood.

"It's effort. It's a challenge. A lot of people don't know, it's an everyday thing," Miller said. "I have a great support system around me that supports me every day and during that redshirt year I needed it most and it was there. I had the whole coaching staff meeting with me every day and working with me every day, just consistently. Even when you don't see the numbers changing at that moment, [it is beneficial] just having them there supporting you, letting you know that [things] will change and everything you're doing is for the better."

After previously playing Miller for 109 total minutes in his career, Larrañaga started the skilled big man opening night against fifth-ranked Louisville last year. He retained his starting spot nearly all year, scored in double figures 10 times and finished top-20 in the ACC in both offensive rebounds and total rebounds per game.

In addition, Miller posted a 56.9 percent clip from the field in league play, good for the fifth-best single-season ACC-only mark in program history. He also picked up All-ACC Academic Team distinction for his performance both on and off the court.

To Larrañaga, seeing Miller's performance on the court validated all the effort put in by both the player himself and those around him.

"I feel like my assistant coaches are terrific at helping players identify the areas of their game that need to be improved and my assistant coaches worked with Rodney in every aspect of his game," Larrañaga shared. "As far as the weightlifting, the conditioning, the weight loss—our strength & conditioning coach did a great job there. His skill development—working on his free throw, working on [his play with] his back to the basket—Adam Fisher really devoted a lot of time to Rodney. You got to give Rodney a lot of credit because, quite frankly, it's exhausting. You ask anyone how difficult it is to lose 30 pounds, that's difficult enough. And then [you need to] get yourself in great shape and work on your skills and become the kind of player that can compete at the highest level. Rodney has done that."

The experience was, of course, rewarding for Miller, as well, after all the time he spent getting himself in a position to be able to perform at that level.

It also was not a surprise to Miller, as the Laurelton, N.Y., native felt he had the ability to make an impact all along.

"Honestly, last season was just a glimpse of what

I already knew I was capable of and what I had in me. It was just showing all the belief and everything that everybody has put into me," Miller said. "It really was a confidence booster, honestly. It was a payoff to see the coaches believing in me, seeing that they put their faith in me and they see their investment out there on the court."

"... It felt like my time, my moment to show the Canes fans who I am. It kind of felt like it was freshman year and this was my first time showing everybody what I can do. Honestly, that's really what it felt like," Miller continued. "I just had fun with it and I tried not to overthink it because I tend to do that. And I just went out there and had fun ... That was my goal, to have fun and enjoy myself and show these people what I can do. And that's what I did."

The next step for Miller, who is days away from beginning his redshirt senior campaign, is to continue his progression on the hardwood. Larrañaga would like to see his pupil improve as a defender and a rebounder, an expectation Miller is quite aware of.

Miami also has more depth in the low post this year and Larrañaga feels that will help Miller excel because, like many big men, he can produce better in shorter bursts than longer ones.

In addition, Miller also will be counted upon to help his team more in ways that do not show up in a box score. He is now only the lone healthy player who was a part of Miami's NCAA Tournament teams in both 2017 and 2018, but also has considerable experience of different kinds he can lean on.

"Rodney has always considered himself a leader and he's really progressed into that role in our program. Our players—his teammates—listen to him," Larrañaga said. "He is the voice of reason and logic. He's someone that's very bright and articulate and can send very simple messages to his teammates. And some of those messages will be from his own past experience as a player, whether it be as a starter or as a sub. He knows that these last two seasons have not been what we've wanted them to be, but he also knows we have far more experience and more talent than we've had in any of the two previous seasons."

Miller indeed enjoys having a leadership role and cites former teammates such as Kamari Murphy and Davon Reed as people who have shown him how to lead. He wants to help the younger players on this team just as Murphy and Reed did for him early on in his career.

Part of Miller's directive in the locker room will be to simply heed the message from Larrañaga. If the Hurricanes do that, Miller sees this talented Hurricane team getting where it wants to be.

"This season, I feel like we got all the pieces and I know our attitudes are great coming in. I feel like this team can be at the top of the ACC. Coach L knows how to get us there," Miller said. "We just got to buy in, go out and do it. I feel like we're going to really shock a lot of people this year and really show them what we're capable of."